

SOVIET POLICY TOWARD IRAN
AND THE STRATEGIC BALANCE IN SOUTHWEST ASIA

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ABSTRACT

When the Shah of Iran was overthrown, many in the West feared either a pro-Soviet successor regime or Soviet military intervention. These fears have proved unfounded. Soviet relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran are worse than with the Shah's regime, and Moscow has refrained from direct intervention. Although the ruling Iranian clerics are vehemently anti-American, as long as they maintain effective political control the Soviets are unlikely to gain significant influence or intervene militarily.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1979, following the fall of the Shah's regime in Iran, the U.S. hostage crisis, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, U.S. policymakers became concerned that Iran might fall under Soviet control, either through the emergence of a leftist, pro-Soviet regime in Teheran, or through Soviet military intervention. Iran was seen as the strategic prize of the region because of its oil and its critical geographic position near the rest of the region's oil and vital sea lanes. In addition, the radical, anti-American policies and rhetoric of revolutionary Iran made it seem to be a threat to other vital U.S. interests in the region. These fears helped prompt the "Carter doctrine" of 1980, which declared the Persian Gulf an area of U.S. vital interest, and subsequent military activities designed to enhance the ability of U.S. forces, under a newly created Central Command, to respond to contingencies in the region.

In 1986, the threat of Soviet control of Iran whether through invasion, subversion or the emergence of a radical leftist regime, seems remote. Although the Islamic Republic of Iran has adopted a militantly anti-American posture, it has not moved closer to the U.S.S.R. After some early "tilting" toward Moscow in the first years of the Islamic Republic, Soviet-Iranian relations deteriorated to the point where they are more strained than under the Shah. Moscow and Teheran now strongly denounce one another. Their economic relations have suffered (after a dramatic improvement in the early 1980s during the U.S.-led boycott of Iran). In 1983, Iranian authorities crushed the Communist Tudeh Party and expelled 18 Soviet diplomats. Iran provides limited support to anti-Soviet Afghan insurgents and refuses to negotiate an end to the war

with Iraq, thwarting some of Moscow's most important objectives in Southwest Asia.

Moscow is displeased with Iran, and the Red Army clearly dwarfs the armed forces of diplomatically isolated Iran. Nevertheless, the Soviet Union appears unlikely to intervene militarily in Iran under present circumstances for a number of reasons.

First, Soviet involvement in Afghanistan reduces the likelihood of such intervention. Afghanistan is not only a "distraction," it also exemplifies the difficulty of subduing a fiercely independent, motivated people.

Second, the clerical followers of Khomeini have succeeded -- despite early expectations to the contrary -- in eliminating most of their rivals and consolidating political power. Thus, Moscow lacks any internationally plausible rationale for intervention and would likely face fierce opposition from a politically and religiously mobilized population three times the size of Afghanistan's.

Third, the Soviet military would face very severe geographical and logistical problems in any attempt to overrun Iran. Iran's oil and Persian Gulf coast are in the south, remote from the Soviet frontier and separated from it by very formidable mountain barriers. There are very few north-south routes that the Soviets could use, and all of them have many "chokepoints" which are easily blocked. U.S. ability to deploy and support forces in the region, though still limited, has been greatly enhanced and now constitutes a significant deterrent to Soviet military intervention in Iran.

And fourth, the domestic priorities of the new Gorbachev regime and the potential cost to Soviet foreign policy in other parts of the world weigh against intervention in Iran. The U.S.S.R., through no actions of its own, has realized its minimum objective in Iran: the total expulsion of U.S. influence. It has been unable, however, to achieve most of its moderately ambitious

objectives: improved state-to-state relations, influence over Iran's domestic and foreign policies, and inclusion of Iran in the leftist-oriented, anti-Western, anti-imperialist bloc. Moscow's maximum objective, transforming Iran into an ally or client, is unobtainable under current circumstances.

Soviet policy toward Iran has hardened noticeably since 1983, and features more "stick" than "carrot." Soviet spokesmen sharply criticize the Khomeini regime. They reject Iran's unilateral renunciation of provisions in a 1921 Soviet-Iranian treaty which allow Soviet military intervention in Iran if Soviet security is threatened from there. In addition, Moscow has resumed large-scale military shipments to Iraq.

Nonetheless, the Soviets are seeking to improve relations with Iran. Their principal instrument appears to be economic cooperation. They are reported to be offering favorable trade deals to Iran, but have met with skeptical receptions. Iran needs economic assistance, but it is unwilling to become economically dependent on either superpower. Soviet-Iranian trade fell sharply in 1984 and 1985.

Moscow has been relatively restrained in its policies toward the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly in view of Teheran's generally anti-Soviet attitude and its military vulnerability. Although the Soviets cause some concern along their 1,900 kilometer border with Iran, they have not gone nearly as far as they might in projecting a military threat or in fomenting separatism among the minorities in Iran's northern borderlands.

This Soviet restraint also suggests that they have not written off the Iranian revolution. They wish to avoid unnecessarily antagonizing Iran, while hoping for (and working toward) improved relations and a favorable political evolution in Teheran.

Any future treaty and
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Soviet policies toward Iran are unlikely to change dramatically in the near term. Moscow probably feels it can afford to be patient. There are some circumstances, however, under which the U.S.S.R. might be inclined to pursue policies designed to destabilize Iran.

One such contingency would be a decisive Iranian victory over Iraq. Moscow presumably would find such a development very troubling because it might make Iran the dominant power in the Gulf and intensify the threat of spreading militant Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan and Soviet Central Asia. The Soviets might take military steps to avert such a development, although they would likely opt for actions short of direct aggression against Iran. Despite Iranian military successes against Iraq in 1985 and 1986, and mounting Iranian offensive pressure, Iraq, although strained, still appears far from collapse materially, though some analysts are uncertain of the ability of its armed forces to maintain their will to fight. Even in the face of an imminent Iraqi defeat, however, Moscow might prefer to avoid direct military intervention against Iran -- and the risk of drawing the United States into the conflict.

Large-scale Iranian intervention on behalf of the Afghan insurgents also could trigger a Soviet military response. But Iran has shown considerable restraint in its support of Afghan insurgents, and is not likely to act so provocatively as to invite Soviet aggression.

A somewhat more plausible contingency which might lead to Soviet intervention is political fragmentation in post-Khomeini Iran. There is no clear successor to Khomeini. If his death were to foment dissension among the ruling clerics, the emergence of both an effective leftist opposition and renewed agitation for autonomy among the non-Persian minorities might result. Political turmoil and economic chaos associated with such developments cannot be ruled

out. This might open the door to Soviet intervention, either at the invitation of some Iranian faction or on the pretext of restoring order across the border.

Khomeini's death will be a crucial test of the stability of the Islamic Republic. The overwhelming majority of published sources and experts consulted for this study, however, believe that the clerics will be able to manage the succession and retain political control of the country for some time. Thus, the prospects for intervention by the U.S.S.R. are low.

Iran continues to pose serious challenges for U.S. policy in the region. Iran's militant Islamic fundamentalism is explicitly anti-American, but it is also a bulwark against Soviet penetration. U.S. interests in the region appear to be well served by policies that deter Soviet intervention and oppose Iranian adventurism in ways that do not alienate the post-Khomeini generation and create opportunities for the Soviet Union.

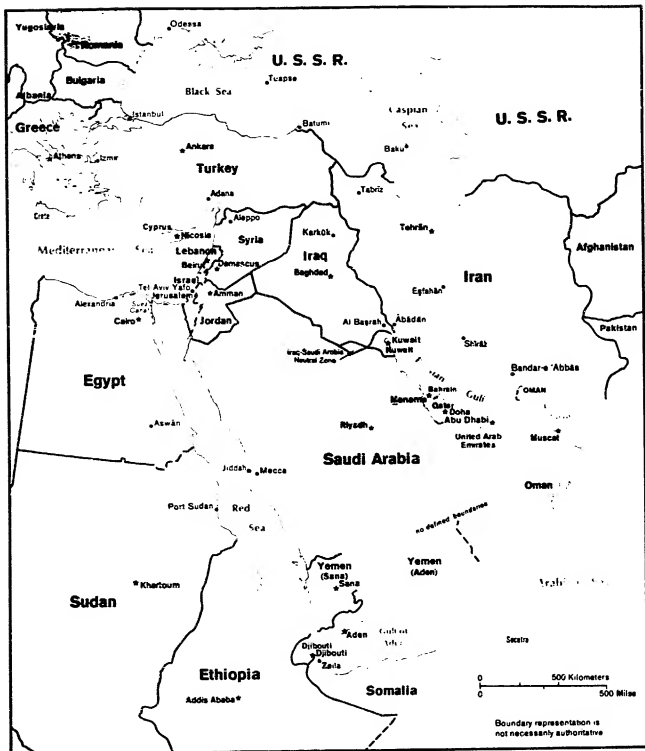
U.S. FEARS OF A SOVIET TAKEOVER IN IRAN

In 1979, events in Iran and Afghanistan focused U.S. attention on Southwest Asia as never before. The Shah fell. An increasingly anti-American regime emerged in Teheran. American hostages were seized and held in Iran for 444 days. And the Soviet Union invaded neighboring Afghanistan. There, events created a sense of U.S. weakness and Soviet menace in a strategically sensitive region where U.S. posture seemed relatively secure only a short while earlier. Many studies written at that time repeat the phrase, "Iran is the great strategic prize of the region." It is more populous than all the other Persian Gulf states combined. It has great oil wealth. And its geographic position commands the major land, sea, and air routes of the region.

U.S. policymakers suddenly saw the possibility that Iran -- former linchpin of the U.S. security system in the region -- might fall under Soviet control. There appeared to be two threats: a) that a leftist regime might come to power in Teheran and ally itself with Moscow (as had occurred earlier in Iraq); or b) that the U.S.S.R. might intervene militarily in Iran and install a client government (as it had just done in Afghanistan).

These fears played a central role in President Carter's declaration of the Persian Gulf as an area of U.S. vital interest, to be defended by all

Iran and the Middle East



means including military, if necessary. 1/ One of the main reasons for the formation of the U.S. Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) at that time was to meet such Iranian contingencies. 2/

FEAR OF A PRO-SOVIET IRAN

Revolutionary Iran's expulsion of the substantial U.S. military presence and of all U.S. political influence was a serious blow to the United States and a windfall for the Soviet Union. 3/ Moreover, the ensuing turmoil in Iran seemed to open the possibility of a pro-Soviet regime coming to power. Many observers feared that a deterioration of U.S.-Iranian relations would produce an automatic and proportional improvement in Soviet-Iranian relations.

The following developments were cited by various observers as evidence of that danger. 4/

- ° The first foreign ambassador received by Ayatollah Khomeini was V. M. Vinogradov of the U.S.S.R.

1/ President Carter, in his January 23, 1980, State of the Union message, declared: "Any attempt by any outside force to gain control over the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."

2/ Lungerich, Raphael. U.S. Rapid Deployment Forces - USCENTCOM - What Is It? Can it Do the Job? Armed Forces Journal International, Oct. 1984. p. 88-89.

3/ While Moscow had every reason to applaud this development, it did not cause it. Moscow appears to have been as surprised as Washington by the rapid collapse of the Shah's regime. Chubin, Shahram. The Soviet Union and Iran. Foreign Affairs, v. 61, spring 1983. p. 924, 935.

4/ See, for example: Bodansky, Yossef. Moscow Maneuvers Toward a Take-over in Iran. Business Week, Aug. 15, 1983; Phillips, James A. A Mounting Soviet Threat to the Northern Tier. Heritage Foundation Backgrounder, July 1, 1983. Kelly, S. B. The Soviet Penetration of Iran. Center for International Security. Contemporary Paper. v. 12, no. 1, 1983; and Chubin, The Soviet Union and Iran. Of these, Chubin presents the case most cogently.

- ° Prime Minister Bazargan lost his job and President Bani Sadr was "considered suspect" for promoting a policy of equidistance between the superpowers. Even the America-baiting Foreign Minister Ghotbzadeh was defamed as an "American agent" for seeking to maintain a "negative balance" between Washington and Moscow. In contrast, Energy Minister Ghafuri Fard could refer to the U.S.S.R. as a "friendly country" without apparent reprimand.
- ° When foreign banks were nationalized in Iran, the Russo-Iran Bank (the only bank exclusively foreign-owned) was exempted from the nationalization.
- ° When all secular political parties were banned, the Tudeh (Masses) Party, Iran's Moscow-oriented Communist party, was permitted to continue its activities (until early 1983).
- ° Iranian authorities showed more enthusiasm for an Islamic holy war against distant Israel than on behalf of their neighboring co-religionist victims of Soviet aggression in Afghanistan.
- ° Some believe that Iranian authorities gave the U.S.S.R. access to the radar systems of the highly sophisticated U.S. F-14 jet fighter and its Phoenix missile, although this is disputed by others. 5/
- ° By 1983, there were 1,500-2,000 Soviet advisors and technicians in Iran. In addition there were hundreds of East Germans and North Koreans.

And in the eyes of some observers, the virulently anti-U.S., anti-Israel rhetoric and policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran had a made-in-Moscow look.

THREAT OF SOVIET MILITARY INTERVENTION

To some observers, the main threat was that of direct Soviet military intervention in Iran. Russia had a long history of interest in the region, and had coveted, threatened, and attacked Iran (formerly Persia) since the time of Peter the Great in the early 18th century. Nor did this interest end with the replacement of Romanov Tsars by Bolshevik Commissars.

Scarcely a month after seizing power, the Bolsheviks formally renounced imperialism in general and such compacts as the Anglo-Russian agreements of

5/ Chubin charges that Iran gave these radars to the U.S.S.R. Chubin, *The Soviet Union and Iran*, p. 932-935. Some U.S. intelligence officers interviewed for this project doubt Chubin's allegation.

1907-1915 that had given Russia control of northern Persia [Iran]. Actually, Lenin and Trotsky retained an active interest in Persia: first, as a battleground for the overthrow of capitalist imperialism, which they believed would facilitate the spread of revolution to the West, and later because of Persia's geostrategic importance during the Russian Civil War.

In February 1921, the Soviet government put national interest ahead of revolutionary internationalism by abandoning the weak Persian Soviet Socialist Republic it had sponsored in the north Persian province of Gilan, in favor of improved state-to-state relations and a Treaty of Friendship with the government in Teheran. The broadly worded articles 5 and 6 of this treaty contain provisions permitting Moscow to send troops into Persia if Soviet territory were attacked or threatened by external forces on Persian soil and the Persian government itself were unable to cope with the situation. These provisions are widely but perhaps improperly regarded as a potential rationale for Soviet military intervention. 6/ Iranian authorities unilaterally renounced articles 5 and 6 in November 1979, but Moscow denies the validity of this action, claiming the continued right of intervention if circumstances warrant. 7/

6/ Persian authorities sought to clarify and limit Moscow's right to intervene before ratifying the treaty. An exchange of letters between the Soviet and Persian governments in December 1921, included as annexes to the treaty, specified that articles 5 and 6 pertained only to attacks or threats from anti-Bolshevik White Russian forces (remnants of which had crossed into Persia toward the end of the Civil War) or from other countries acting on behalf of the Whites. This limitation on articles 5 and 6 is overlooked or misunderstood in much of the Western literature on this subject -- an oversight Moscow apparently would like to encourage. CRS interviews with Professors Muriel Atkin and Firuz Kazemzadeh. See also, Kazemzadeh, Firuz. Russia and the Middle East. In Lederer, Ivo J., ed. Russian Foreign Policy. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1962. p. 523. For a legal discussion of whether articles 5 and 6 are now valid, see W. Michael Reisman. Termination of the USSR's Treaty Right of Intervention in Iran. American Journal of International Law. vol. 74. Jan. 1980. p. 144-154. Articles 5 and 6 and the annexes to the 1921 treaty can be seen in appendix I.

7/ Chubin, The Soviet Union and Iran, p. 940.

Circumstances warranted Soviet intervention during the Second World War, when the Iranian government seemed to tilt toward Nazi Germany. Britain and the U.S.S.R. jointly intervened to neutralize the threat and to try to open a land route for the supply of war materials to Russia. The Soviets occupied northern Iran, under the provisions of the 1921 treaty. At the end of the war, Moscow sponsored the establishment of the Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan and the Kurdish People's Republic in northern Iran, along with their similar efforts throughout Eastern Europe.

As with Greece and Turkey, however, the United States had direct access to Iran by sea. Also, the central government in Teheran, which was beyond the reach of the Red Army, sought U.S. support against the Soviet occupation. The combination of U.S. and British pressure and canny diplomacy by the authorities in Teheran resulted in the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Iran in May 1946 and the collapse of the Communist regimes in Iranian Azerbaijan and Kurdistan soon after. 8/

In 1946, the United States was the only global superpower. Its economy was robust, its Government confident, its people optimistic. Although much of the U.S. armed forces were being demobilized rapidly, they enjoyed a monopoly on nuclear weapons which would not be broken until 1949. The Soviet Union, in contrast, had sustained immense losses during the war and was fully occupied in subjugating Eastern Europe. Moscow chose to avoid a confrontation with Washington and London over Iran which might have spilled over to Eastern Europe, where Soviet control had not yet been consolidated. Presumably, Stalin did not consider Iran vital at that time.

By the late 1970s, however, the global and regional balance of power appeared quite different. Britain had long since given up its place as a

8/ Kazemadseh, Russia and the Middle East, p. 528-529.

major power in Southwest Asia, leaving that role entirely to the United States. In the aftermath of Vietnam and Watergate, the American people and Government seemed less confident of the Nation's international role. While it was undoubtedly still a superpower, the United States had lost its military predominance vis-a-vis the U.S.S.R. Not only had the Soviet Union established at least "rough equivalence" with the United States in nuclear weapons, but had sustained its quantitative superiority in conventional ground and air forces and substantially increased its power projection capability. In Angola, Ethiopia, Cambodia, and Afghanistan, the Soviets and their allies showed increasing willingness to use military force in the Third World, which the United States, caught up in the so-called post-Vietnam syndrome of global retrenchment, was unwilling to match. Many were asking, "Has the United States become number two?"

The period 1979-80 was a time of trauma for the United States in Southwest Asia. Iran's status rapidly shifted from America's principal ally to a seemingly implacable foe, symbolized by the 444-day hostage crisis. While Iran's new religious and political leaders denounced the United States as the Great Satan, political conditions in the country seemed highly unstable. How should/could the United States respond, U.S. policymakers asked, if Moscow tried to take military advantage of the situation in Iran? This question gained special urgency after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan sent powerful shock waves through the U.S. Government. Soviet justifications were brushed aside. 9/ It was seen as a blatant act of aggression against a weak neighboring state; a piece of military adventurism that was the more shocking as it came while the Senate was

9/ U.S. Library of Congress. Congressional Research Service. Afghanistan: Soviet Invasion and U.S. Response. Issue Brief No. IB80006, by Richard P. Cronin, archived March 25, 1982. Washington, 1982.

still considering ratification of the SALT II treaty. Afghanistan seemed to confirm Americans' worst suspicions about Soviet intentions. It swept away the reassuring belief that the U.S.S.R. was and would remain very cautious about the use of military force outside its own boundaries and those of its Warsaw Pact "allies." The imbalance that Moscow enjoyed in conventional ground force strength took on a more threatening aspect. Many believed that the Soviets would rapidly crush the anti-Communist resistance and consolidate their position in Afghanistan. The Soviets themselves almost certainly thought so. Would Soviet aggression stop there? Was the invasion of Afghanistan merely a defensive move by Moscow to prevent the overthrow of a Communist regime in a neighboring state? Was it a piece of political/military opportunism? Or was it part of a Soviet plan for southward expansion?

Russian and Soviet expansionism had long been seen as motivated in part by a desire for access to warm water ports and the open sea. 10/ Although Afghanistan is landlocked, it borders on Pakistan and Iran, bringing Moscow considerably closer to the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean. If the Soviets succeeded in pushing southward through Afghanistan to the adjacent littoral states, they might be able to control the vital oil and sea lanes of that region, on which Japan, Western Europe (and ultimately the United States) are dependent. Also, CIA estimates of that period predicted that the U.S.S.R. faced a looming energy crisis which would transform it into a major oil importer within a decade. 11/

In 1980, the Soviet thrust into Afghanistan appeared doubly ominous. First, it was a Soviet advance into a country that had traditionally been a

10/ Kerner, Robert. The Urge to the Sea. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1942.

11/ U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. Prospects for Soviet Oil Production. April 1977; and Prospects for Soviet Oil Production: A Supplemental Analysis. July 1977.

buffer against Russian penetration, demonstrating Soviet willingness to use force and take risks. Second, Afghanistan was seen by many as a staging area or jumping-off point for further southward thrusts. Iran and Pakistan seemed tempting targets. Pakistan, though relatively weak and vulnerable, was afforded some protection against a direct Soviet military threat by its ties to the United States and China.

In Washington, the Soviet threat to Iran appeared great. Iran expelled the Americans and withdrew from the Central Treaty Organization, 12/ and then seized hostages at the U.S. Embassy. Iran had no major ally or protector. Khomeini and his followers seemed intent on dismantling Iran's formidable armed forces, which they viewed with suspicion as a bulwark of the former Shah's regime. The new Islamic Republic of Iran was wracked with internal turmoil. Rival factions battled in the streets and on university campuses. Separatist movements among the Kurds and Azeris in Northern Iran threatened political fragmentation. The Communist Tudeh Party appeared to play a prominent role in Teheran and among the oil field workers. Terrorist bombings by militant leftist factions threatened to destroy the government. Rumors of plots and coups were common. The economy was in shambles.

In the event of political disintegration in Iran, one faction or another might call upon Moscow for military support to maintain itself in power, opening the way for a Soviet takeover. A leftist government might seize power and invite the Soviets in. The Soviets might themselves install a puppet regime in a fragmented Iran and induce the call for "fraternal assistance." Moscow

12/ The Baghdad Pact, a U.S. and British-sponsored regional collective security treaty, collapsed in 1958 after a revolution in Iraq replaced the conservative monarchy with a radical Ba'athist regime. The Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), among Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, and Great Britain was its successor. CENTO was dissolved in 1979 when Iran withdrew. Mitra, N. Iran and the Soviet Union. IDSA Journal, v. 14, Apr.-June 1982. p. 597-616.

might promote fragmentation in northern Iran, resurrecting People's Republics in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. Or the Soviets might use articles 5 or 6 of the treaty of 1921 as a pretext to intervene in an Iran beset by internal conflict. These were nightmare scenarios in Washington in 1980.

In the Soviet military districts nearest Iran, the U.S.S.R. had approximately 30 army divisions (26 motorized infantry, 2 artillery, and 2 armored divisions). In addition, there were two elite airborne divisions available nearby, as well as some 700-800 tactical aircraft. 13/ Even allowing for the relatively low level of combat readiness of many of these forces, it was a potentially overwhelming force.

In Washington, the Soviet threat to Iran seemed magnified by the weakness of credible U.S. deterrent capability. The United States had no attractive military options with which to respond to a Soviet thrust into Iran. The Khomeini regime and the Carter Administration regarded one another as anathema. There was little likelihood of cooperation between them under any circumstances. America's NATO allies and Japan sympathized with the United States in the hostage crisis, but were unwilling to commit forces to potential combat in the region. Washington found it difficult even to find friendly nations in the region willing to provide military bases for forward deployment of U.S. forces. 14/

Bases were a critical problem in contemplating a military conflict with the U.S.S.R. in Iran, because of the great distance between the United States and the Persian Gulf. 15/ The United States could not shift its forces from

13/ International Institute for Strategic Studies. Military Balance 1979-1980. London, 1979. p. 9-11.

14/ On the U.S. search for bases in the region, see Singh, Iqbal. U.S. Defense Policy and Power Projection in Southwest Asia. Washington, Washington Institute for Values in Public Policy, 1984.

15/ The distance from the U.S. east coast to Bandar Khomein via the Suez Canal is 8,580 miles. From the U.S. west coast, the distance is 11,600 miles.

Europe to the Persian Gulf without dangerously weakening NATO's central front in a time of crisis. The logistical burden of deploying forces from the United States was overwhelming.

When President Carter committed the United States to the defense of the region in January 1980, many in Congress saw it as a hollow guarantee or a bluff which the United States might not be able to back up in a crisis. 16/ Some in Washington spoke of "horizontal escalation," conceding that the United States might not challenge the Soviet Union in Iran, but might retaliate against Soviet military assets in another region (e.g., Cuba, Vietnam, the Soviet Far East). 17/ This may have been thought to have some deterrent value against the U.S.S.R., but it reveals the scarcity of resources and options available to U.S. military planners in 1980 as they contemplated confronting the Soviet Army in Iran.

This perception of Soviet threat and U.S. weakness in Southwest Asia was a crucial factor in the establishment of the U.S. Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) in 1980. In a February 1, 1983, report to Congress, Secretary of Defense Weinberger declared that, "the primary mission of the CINCCENTCOM is to deter Soviet aggression and to protect U.S. interests in Southwest Asia." 18/

16/ Representative John Rhodes, the House Republican leader at the time, said, "There was a lot of saber-rattling but not much in the [sic] saber." New York Times, Jan. 24, 1980: A14.

17/ Singh, U.S. Defense Policy, p. 27.

18/ The RDF was formally designated Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF) which, in 1983, was designated Central Command (CENTCOM), whose commander is CINCCENT, Commander-in-Chief Central Command. CENTCOM is the first new geographically oriented U.S. unified command since the 1940s.

SOVIET DISAPPOINTMENTS IN IRAN

SOVIET OBJECTIVES

Analysis of Soviet policy toward Iran since the fall of the Shah suggests the following set of objectives:

At a minimum, Moscow seeks to prevent a U.S.-Iranian rapprochement and the reestablishment of close ties -- especially military cooperation -- between Washington and Teheran. Such a development would undo the principal benefit Moscow has derived from the Iranian Revolution. In fact, there is little likelihood of this happening in the foreseeable future. Still, Soviet foreign policy, trade policy, and propaganda are coordinated to counteract any such development. Since November 1978, when Brezhnev publicly warned against any foreign intervention in Iranian affairs, 19/ Moscow has portrayed itself as the "protector of the Iranian revolution." In that role it loses no opportunity to warn Teheran of the threat of U.S. intervention. 20/

A somewhat more ambitious set of medium objectives are to improve Soviet-Iranian state-to-state relations, to influence Iranian domestic policies in

19/ "The Soviet Union . . . is against outside interference in Iran's internal affairs by anyone, in any form, under any pretext . . . any, particularly military, interference in the affairs of Iran, a state directly bordering on the Soviet Union, would be regarded by the Soviet Union as affecting its security interests." Pravda, Nov. 19, 1978: 5.

20/ Atkin, Muriel. The Islamic Republic and the Soviet Union. In Keddie, Nikki, and Eric Hooglund, eds. The Iranian Revolution. Westview Press [Forthcoming].

a pro-Soviet direction, and to cultivate Iran as a member of the left-leaning anti-Western, anti-imperialist coalition.

Maximally, it would be a tremendous achievement for Moscow if Iran were transformed into an ally or client. Control of Iran's oil and access to bases in Iran might make the U.S.S.R. the dominant force in the region. This would not only shift the correlation of forces locally, but perhaps globally as well, in view of European and Japanese dependence on Persian Gulf oil.

In all likelihood the Soviets consider their minimum objective satisfied. There continues to be profound antipathy between the United States and Iran. Hostility to "the Great Satan" is so deeply ingrained in the Islamic Republic that even after Khomeini's death the regime is unlikely to restore close ties with the United States in the foreseeable future. 21/ This is not primarily the result of Soviet actions, but the Soviets probably congratulate themselves on the outcome and on their modest contributions to it.

It is clear, however, that the Soviets are increasingly frustrated by their inability to achieve most of their medium objectives. Not only have Soviet-Iranian relations not grown warmer, as Moscow wished, there has been an increasing chill in state-to-state relations, especially since 1983. 22/ The Islamic Republic's suppression of the Tudeh Party, its expulsion of Soviet diplomats and journalists, and its rightward swing in social and economic policies are among the more obvious indications of Moscow's inability to influence Iran's domestic policies as it would wish. Moscow has been able to find some common ground with Teheran in foreign policy, most notably their mutual

21/ Ross, Dennis. Soviet Views Toward the Gulf War. Orbis, v. 28, fall 1984 p. 444.

22/ Atkin, Muriel. Moscow's Disenchantment With Iran. Survey, v. 27, autumn-winter 1983.

opposition to the U.S. role in the Middle East and to Israel. Iran and the Soviet Union also both share close relations with Syria and Libya. But Moscow has not been able to use these common interests to bring Iran into that loose coalition of anti-imperialist, anti-Western states that often take their lead from Moscow in international affairs. The Islamic Republic remains suspicious of the Soviet Union and hostile to Communism, and while excoriating the United States, has cultivated good relations with Turkey, Pakistan, Western Europe, and Japan.

Moscow's maximum objective, of transforming Iran into an ally or client, appears to be entirely out of reach and unobtainable at present.

INDICATORS OF SOVIET FAILURE TO GAIN INFLUENCE IN IRAN

Specialists such as Zalmay Khalilzad emphasize that, "Moscow's effort to gain greater influence in Iran has not worked. Indeed . . . some of its tactics have been counterproductive." 23/ The following developments suggest Moscow's failure to gain major influence in Iran and illustrate a deterioration of Soviet-Iranian relations.

- * Khomeini and many of the dominant clerics in Iran persistently denounce the U.S.S.R. as the "Little Satan" and the home of "social imperialism," and warn of the dangers of Communism. 24/
- * In March 1980, Iran halted its exports of natural gas to the U.S.S.R. because of a price dispute. Iran had been exporting 5 billion cubic meters annually to the U.S.S.R. through IGAT I (Iranian Gas Trunkline I). Iran also halted construction of the \$3 billion IGAT II pipeline, which was to have been completed in 1981 to deliver even larger quantities of gas to the southern republics of the U.S.S.R. 25/

23/ Khalilzad, Zalmay. Islamic Iran: Soviet Dilemma. Problems of Communism, Jan.-Feb. 1984. p. 6.

24/ Ibid., p. 7.

25/ Mitra, Iran and the Soviet Union, p. 606-607.

- Despite the U.S. embargo on trade with Iran, and the effects of the war with Iraq, Iran did not turn to the Soviets as major trade partners, although Moscow sought to woo Iranian trade. Instead, seeking to avoid economic dependence on the U.S.S.R., Iran strengthened its economic ties with Turkey, Pakistan, Western Europe, Japan, and China. 26/
- Moscow clearly hoped that the Iranian Revolution would grow more radical, leading to a leftist, pro-Soviet regime. Brezhnev optimistically voiced such expectations at the 26th Soviet Communist Party Congress in February 1981, when he applauded the Iranian Revolution as "a major event in international life" and "basically an anti-imperialist revolution." Instead, the clerically dominated Islamic Republican Party (IRP) emerged as the paramount political force; and within the IRP the conservative faction prevailed, reversing earlier radical measures and proposals such as land distribution and the nationalization of major industries and of foreign trade. 27/
- Iran has expelled many Soviet diplomats and journalists. The most dramatic such episode was the expulsion of 18 Soviet diplomats on charges of espionage in April-May 1983. 28/
- Early in 1983, Iranian authorities outlawed the Communist Tudeh Party, closed all its offices and publications, and arrested more than a thousand of its activists. Nurreddin Kianuri, Tudeh General Secretary, and other prominent Party leaders were accused of spying for the Soviet Union. Their televised confessions caused a sensation in Teheran and outrage in Moscow. Some Tudeh members who had penetrated high into the Iranian military were tried and executed. Even Iranian exiles bitterly opposed to Khomeini credit the IRP with crushing Tudeh more effectively than did the Shah. 29/
- Iranian support for the anti-Communist insurgency in Afghanistan, although limited and circumscribed, is a serious irritant to the U.S.S.R. Iran does not wish to see the Soviets consolidate control in Afghanistan, and provides some direct support, mostly small arms, to Shiite Muslim rebels in Afghanistan, mainly the Hezare people and the Shiites of Herat. There are reportedly 1-2 million Afghan refugees in Iran, some of whom have been armed and trained by Iranian authorities. Although they are controlled much more closely than their compatriots in Pakistan, and are not free to use Iran's eastern borderlands as a sanctuary from which to conduct operations in Afghanistan, there is some cross-border activity. Iran refuses to recognize the Communist regime in Kabul and opposes Pakistani negotiations with Kabul. 30/

26/ Khalilzad, Islamic Iran, p. 12-13.

27/ Atkin, Moscow's Disenchantment, p. 255-257.

28/ Ibid., p. 251.

29/ Atkin, The Islamic Republic and the Soviet Union.

30/ Interviews with numerous regional specialists.

- * Iran directs religious radio broadcasts into the southern Soviet republics with their large Muslim populations. There are conflicting assessments of the effectiveness of this religious propaganda, but it is surely a source of friction in Soviet-Iranian relations. 31/

SOVIET MILITARY AND POLITICAL RESTRAINT

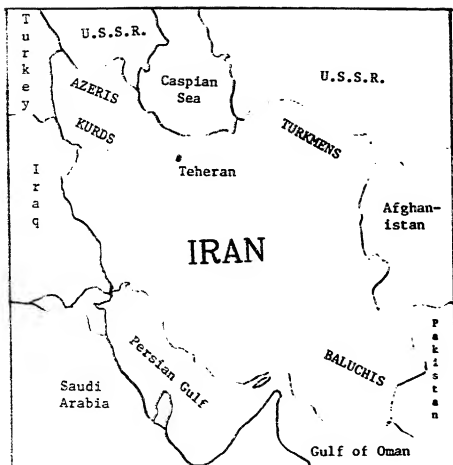
While Moscow failed to gain the sort of influence it had hoped for in Iran after the fall of the Shah and the expulsion of the United States, it has refrained from mounting a direct military or political challenge to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran's insistence on pressing home the war against Iraq to overthrow the Saddam Hussein regime in Baghdad leaves Iran largely isolated internationally, with its military resources overextended and concentrated on the western front against Iraq. Under such circumstances, Iran is peculiarly vulnerable to military pressure from the U.S.S.R. An increase of Soviet forces or force readiness near the Iranian frontier, or large-scale military exercises there, might impose a costly and difficult added military burden on Iran by forcing Teheran to increase its military strength in the north and east. Yet the Soviets appear not to have applied strong pressure there, even during massive Iranian troop buildups on the Iraqi front widely thought to herald an Iranian all-out offensive. 32/

The Soviet Union also has been restrained in its policy toward the minorities in Iran's northern provinces. These are territories in which Moscow can claim an "historic interest," since Russian/Soviet forces have occupied them

31/ Nissman, David. Iran and Soviet Islam: The Azerbaijan and Turkmeistan S.S.R.s. Central Asian Survey, v. 2, Dec. 1983. p. 45-60. Moscow can hardly claim innocence in this regard. It has been broadcasting its own propaganda into Iran via the clandestine National Voice Of Iran, located in the Soviet city of Baku, since 1959.

32/ According to U.S. intelligence officials, Soviet military pressure on Iran's borders has remained at a steady but moderate level since 1984.

Some of Iran's Non-Persian Minorities



three times in this century. 33/ Soviet interest is thought to center on the Azeris, Kurds, and Turkmens of Northern Iran. Each of these non-Persian groups has shown signs of restiveness under both the Shah's rule and that of the Islamic Republic. But Moscow does not appear to be fomenting rebellion in Iran's northern borderlands.

In terms of Soviet-Iranian relations, Azerbaijan is the most important of the border regions in northern Iran. Figures on the ethnic composition of Iran are imprecise, but of an Iranian population of 43-45 million, there are approximately 5-6 million Azeris (some estimates go as high as 8-10 million), concentrated in the strategic provinces of East and West Azerbaijan, adjacent to the U.S.S.R. and Turkey. The Azeris' Turkic language sets them apart from most Iranians, although they are Shiite Muslims. There is a presumed affinity between Iranian Azeris and those across the border in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan. Some analysts consider it significant that Soviet spokesmen consistently refer to Iranian Azerbaijan as "Southern Azerbaijan," implying that it is something less than an integral part of Iran. 34/

In November 1982, Geidar Aliyev, full member of the Politburo and former Party boss in the Azerbaijan S.S.R., told Western visitors it was his "personal hope" that Soviet and Iranian Azerbaijan would be united in the future. 35/ This statement raised many eyebrows, not least of all in Teheran and Tabriz (principal city of Iranian Azerbaijan). It was the more notable because Aliyev

33/ During World War I as a result of the Anglo-Russian Treaty of 1907; 1920-21 during the Russian Civil War; and 1941-46, again in concert with Great Britain (until 1945).

34/ Atkin, Soviet Relations with the Islamic Republic. p. 192

35/ Chubin, The Soviet Union and Iran, p. 933.

made his professional career in the Azerbaijan KGB (1941-69), 36/ rising through the ranks to the top post (1967) before moving on to leadership in the Azerbaijan Communist Party and then the CPSU Politburo. Aliyev must be unusually well informed about conditions in Iranian Azerbaijan, and Iran in general. One wonders what counsel he gives the rest of the Politburo when this subject arises. In any case, Soviet policy appears cautious. They are active in intelligence-gathering across the frontier and speak out on behalf of greater autonomy for the Azeris. (The constitution of the new Islamic Republic promises more autonomy than under the Shah, but the early relaxation of central control has been reversed as Teheran seeks to reimpose more centralism.) Nonetheless, while "keeping its hand in," Moscow does not appear to be fomenting Azeri separatism or opposition to Teheran's authority. 37/

In Northeast Iran there is a significant Turkmen minority adjacent to the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic. Their Turkic language and practice of Sunni Islam set them apart from the Persian Shiite majority. The Turkmen complain of the suppression of their language by the central authorities. Yet Moscow reportedly is cool toward Turkmen nationalism, perhaps because many of Iran's Turkmen are descended from "Basmachi" rebels who fled south from the U.S.S.R. in the 1920s and 1930s after the failure of their long and bitter struggle against Soviet domination. 38/

Nearly a million Kurds live in Northwestern Iran, kin to the Kurds of Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. They possess a very strong tribal identification and a

36/ He is reported to have had a personal and direct role in the Soviet-sponsored Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan in 1945-46.

37/ Atkin, Soviet Relations, p. 191-3; and interviews with U.S. intelligence officials.

38/ Ibid.

demonstrated willingness to fight for autonomy (some say nationhood). Although there is no significant Kurdish population in the U.S.S.R., Moscow has aided Kurdish nationalist groups when it served Soviet interest to do so. Soviet aid was revived, for example, in 1979 with closer Soviet ties to the (Communist-leaning) Kurdish Democratic Party and the reported supply of small arms to some dissident elements in Iranian Kurdistan. But in 1980, after Iranian protests, Moscow apparently backed away from too close an association with Kurdish nationalism, which could only be pursued at the expense of relations with Teheran. 39/

It is difficult to get reliable information on current Soviet activity in Iran's northern borderlands. At this time, however, there is no evidence of Soviet attempts to fragment Iran by promoting separatist movements among the non-Persian minorities. This may be interpreted as a form of Soviet restraint. 40/

Also, as Iran has been more cautious than Pakistan in supporting the Afghan insurgency, Moscow has been relatively restrained in its response to Iranian "provocations" in Afghanistan, compared to the strong political and military pressure Pakistan is subjected to. While Moscow's "proportional" response seems inherently reasonable, such measured reasonableness is not always forthcoming from Moscow, particularly in view of the fact that Pakistan is protected by close ties with the United States and China, while Iran, with no superpower protector, appears more vulnerable to Soviet pressure.

In view of the preceding analysis, two key questions emerge: Why, despite the Iranian Revolution of 1979, has the Soviet Union failed to gain major

39/ Ibid.; Khalilzad, *Islamic Iran*, p. 9-11.

40/ Some specialists (e.g., Atkin and Nissman) believe that even separatist-minded Azeris, Turkmen, and Kurds are highly suspicious of the U.S.S.R. Their people have been incited and betrayed by Moscow more than once, and they are alarmed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Influence in Teheran? What are the implications of this for U.S. policy in the region?

WHY U.S.S.R. FAILED TO GAIN MAJOR INFLUENCE IN IRAN

Following the fall of the Shah and the prolonged crisis in U.S.-Iranian relations, many observers expected Iranian politics to evolve in a leftist, pro-Soviet direction. In retrospect, it is possible to identify a number of different factors, historical, ideological, and political, which prevented such an extreme.

HISTORY OF RUSSIAN/SOVIET ENCROACHMENT

The centuries-long record of Imperial Russian and Soviet encroachments against Persia/Iran are well remembered in Teheran and in Iran's northern borderlands. Nor is this an ancient memory, since three of these invasions occurred in the 20th century. ^{41/} There is no doubt that this historical record, especially of the Soviet-sponsored Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan and Kurdish Peoples Republic in 1945-46, caused many Iranians to be deeply suspicious of Moscow's intentions after the fall of the Shah and weakened incipient pro-Soviet and pro-Communist tendencies. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, an Islamic neighbor, unquestionably heightened Iranian perceptions of the Soviet threat and further undermined pro-Soviet and pro-Communist tendencies in Iran.

^{41/} Russian forces occupied Northern Iran for prolonged periods during Iran's constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911, during World War I, during the Russian Civil War (1919-1921), and during World War II until 1946.

CONFLICTING IDEOLOGIES

As the Iranian Revolution came increasingly to be dominated by the Islamic clergy led by the Ayatollah Khomeini, the rhetoric and ideology of the new regime -- some would say its very *raison d'être* -- took on a militantly religious character. This was no mere facade; it was a fundamental aspect of the revolution and the new Islamic Republic.

Soviet authorities, in dealing with Islamic states, seek to portray the U.S.S.R. as the benevolent homeland of some 45-50 million Soviet Muslims. But the Soviet Union's militant atheism is difficult to conceal and came to be viewed by Iran's clerical leaders as not only incompatible with, but hostile to, their Islamic revival. They have frequently denounced the Soviet Union and Communism as atheistic, anti-Islamic, tyrannical, and exploitative. "America is worse than Britain; Britain is worse than America. The Soviet Union is worse than both of them. Each is worse than the other." Thus spoke the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini in 1964. Sixteen years later, in a speech commemorating the Persian New Year in 1980, Khomeini warned, "Dear friends! Be full aware that the danger represented by Communism is no less than that of America." 42/ The deeply religious Islamic fervor of the anti-Communist, anti-Soviet resistance in Afghanistan strikes a resonant chord in neighboring Iran. Moscow's determined efforts to crush the Afghan Jihad (Holy War) and the presence of 1-2 million Afghan refugees in Iran are concrete and visible reminders of the conflict between the dominant ideologies of the Soviet Union and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

42/ Khalilzad, Islamic Iran, p. 6.

STRENGTH OF THE IRANIAN CLERGY

Soviet leaders were surprised and disappointed by the political strength of the conservative Iranian clergy. The men in Moscow apparently expected a different scenario: an increasingly unpopular, U.S.-supported, repressive monarchy is challenged by a broad coalition of popular resistance; after escalating violence on both sides the old regime is overthrown; bourgeois democratic forces try to fill the political vacuum and assert authority, but are swept aside by increasingly radicalized revolutionary masses, led by a relatively small but well-organized and determined Marxist-Leninist party; a coalition government is formed, dominated by leftists, which turns to the Soviet Union for political and economic support. Soviet-supported leftists gradually expel moderates from power, and a pro-Soviet regime is established.

Instead, to the surprise of many, the Islamic clergy, which played the leading role in overthrowing the Shah, emerged as the dominant political force in Iran. And within the clergy it was the most politically conservative elements that came to the fore. The conservative clerics mobilized the Iranian masses and formed their own mass organizations, such as the Islamic Republican Party, and a paramilitary force, the Revolutionary Guards. One by one they isolated and eliminated their political rivals, starting with the centrist political elements that were tainted by association with the Shah's regime and its supporters. In 1981-82, in a bloody struggle, the clerics decisively defeated the left-wing Mujahidin and Fedayeen factions. The Communist Tudeh Party, seeking to curry favor with Khomeini, the Islamic Republican Party (IRP), and the Islamic masses, is reported to have assisted the IRP in this struggle by providing intelligence about the Mujahidin and Fedayeen. 43/ But

43/ Atkin, Islamic Republic and the Soviet Union.

in 1983, the clerically led IRP crushed the Tudeh. Tudeh was not merely driven underground, it was annihilated. Its top leaders were arrested. Their subsequent televised confessions of treason against the Islamic Republic on behalf of Moscow further damaged Tudeh's reputation among the Iranian masses and strained Soviet-Iranian relations. A remnant of Tudeh cadres escaped north across the Soviet border. The elimination of Tudeh left the Iranian clergy with a monopoly on effective political power. Although there are factions within the clergy, there are no effective political rivals outside it. Nor are any of the clerical factions in Iran known to be favorably disposed toward Moscow. There are no "red Mullahs."

HEAVY-HANDED SOVIET TACTICS

The Soviets' own heavy-handed tactics after the fall of the Shah contributed to their failure to gain influence in Iran.

Soviet propaganda directed at revolutionary Iran was not very effective and may have been counterproductive in some respects. Surprised by the sudden collapse of the Shah's regime in 1979, Soviet policymakers belatedly adopted a "revolutionary" propaganda line. Soviet spokesmen lauded the Tudeh Party as the vanguard of the Iranian revolution, claiming that Tudeh was decisive in mobilizing the Iranian masses and providing leadership for the anti-Shah forces. Soviet propaganda also suggested that with Tudeh's leadership, the class-consciousness of the Iranian masses was being heightened, making possible the transformation of the revolution from the political to the socio-economic sphere. Such claims not only offended the Iranian clerics and their followers, who saw themselves as the vanguard of the revolution, but also aroused suspicions about Soviet machinations in Iranian politics. The fact that virtually all Tudeh publications were printed in the Soviet Union, and that Tudeh's

radio broadcasts also originated from Soviet territory, probably strengthened the common perception that Tudeh was closely linked to Moscow, lacked independence, and was perhaps an instrument of Soviet policy.

Another example of the heavy-handed Soviet approach to Iran was in the negotiations over the price of Iranian gas exports. In 1980, Iranian authorities sought to renegotiate all contracts under which the Soviets were buying approximately 5 billion cubic meters of Iranian gas annually, at about one-fifth of the market price. Soviet negotiators, perhaps believing that Iran was locked into the Soviet market by the IGAT pipeline running from Iran to the U.S.S.R., adopted a tough negotiating position. Rather than continuing to sell at below-market prices, Iran terminated the contracts and closed down operation of the pipeline in March 1980. 44/

Perhaps the most resented example of Soviet heavy-handedness toward Iran is its handling of the 1921 Soviet-Iranian Friendship Treaty. Moscow's continued refusal to accept Teheran's renunciation of articles 5 and 6 of the treaty, providing for Soviet military intervention in Iran, inevitably arouses suspicion in Iran about Soviet intentions.

IRAN-IRAQ WAR

The Gulf war that began in 1980 also exacerbated Soviet-Iranian relations. It is probably quite true, as the Soviets claim, that they opposed the Gulf war from the first and have consistently sought to end it. But many Iranians saw Iraq as a Soviet ally, equipped with Soviet weapons. Iraq continued to receive some material support from the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe, even during the early phase of the war. By 1982-83, as Iranian troops went over to the

44/ Khalilzad, Islamic Iran, p. 12.

offensive, Moscow abandoned its neutral posture and resumed large-scale military support of Iraq. Soviet support of Iraq remains the most divisive issue in Soviet-Iranian relations.

SOVIET MILITARY RESTRAINT

The preceding chapters have shown why, despite U.S. fears, the Iranian revolution did not move in a leftist, pro-Soviet direction. The other major concern in Washington about Iran at that time was that the Soviet Union might intervene militarily. Because of the expulsion of Americans from Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the use of Soviet military force against Iran was seen as a distinct possibility. In fact, in August 1980, U.S. intelligence detected Soviet troop movements and other military preparations which seemed to presage a thrust into Iran. Secretary of Defense Harold Brown reportedly presided over an "agonizing" meeting with military planners in which some "gruesome" military options were discussed at great length. 45/

The U.S.S.R., of course, did not move militarily against Iran at that time or subsequently, despite its seemingly overwhelming local military advantages. Although the possibility of future Soviet military intervention in Iran can not be ruled out, a number of significant political and military constraints militate against such intervention.

DOMESTIC STRENGTH OF THE IRANIAN REGIME

The strength and durability of the regime in Teheran is an important factor. In 1979-80, there were serious doubts about whether Khomeini and the

45/ The authenticity of this episode is disputed. See Benjamin F. Schemmer. Was the US Ready to Resort to Nuclear Weapons for the Persian Gulf in 1980? Armed Forces Journal International, Sept. 1986. p. 92-105.

clerics associated with him would be able to consolidate a stable political order. They were seen as politically inexperienced and likely to be confronted by potent political opposition from monarchists, the military, the westernized intelligentsia and urban middle class, the Tudeh Party, other radical parties such as the Mujahedin-e Khalq and the Fedayeen, and separatist movements among the Kurds, Azeris, Turkmens, Baluchis, Arabs, and others. The possibilities of political fragmentation, a coup d'etat, or civil war were raised. Many observers expected a period of prolonged turmoil and political instability. 46/

Such conditions were seen as conducive to Soviet intervention, either because an embattled leftist or separatist faction might request "fraternal Soviet military assistance," or because regional anarchy or civil war might provide a pretext for Soviet intervention and the establishment of a client regime.

In fact, Iran's clerical leaders succeeded in mobilizing the masses who had previously been politically inert and decisively defeated all domestic political opposition. Iranian emigres hostile to Khomeini and the clerics now speak of the "institutionalization" of the Islamic Republic and the Khomeini revolution. 47/ The internal strength of the Islamic Republic and Khomeini's charismatic leadership cannot be overlooked by those in Moscow examining military options toward Iran. It deprives Moscow of any internationally plausible rationale for intervention and is a powerful disincentive to Soviet military action.

46/ See, for example, Ross, Dennis. Considering Soviet Threats in the Persian Gulf. International Security, v. 6, fall 1981. p. 159-180; and Kelly, S. B. The Soviet Penetration of Iran. Center for International Security. Contemporary Paper, v. 12, no. 1, 1983; and Phillips, James A. A Mounting Soviet Threat to the Northern Tier. Heritage Foundation Backgrounder. July 1, 1983.

47/ Conference proceedings: Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Washington, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, May 15, 1984.

MILITARY DIFFICULTIES

The U.S.S.R. undoubtedly could marshal massive ground and air forces for operations in neighboring Iran. In the southern military districts near Iran (excluding forces tied down in Afghanistan), there are some 24 Soviet army divisions (2 airborne, 2 armored, the remainder motorized infantry) with more than 5,000 tanks, plus nearly 900 tactical aircraft. 48/ Many more divisions, aircraft, and specialized units could be withdrawn from Central Asia and from the Strategic Reserve without depleting Soviet forces confronting China and NATO.

Iran's armed forces include 11 regular army divisions plus 10 divisions of revolutionary guards (pasdaran). The great majority of these are deployed in the west against Iraq, as are most of Iran's artillery and other heavy weapons. It is not clear what fraction of Iran's mixed inventory of 1,000 tanks remains intact, but of the approximately 500 combat aircraft in the Shah's Air Force, about 80 are believed to be serviceable. 49/

Despite this imbalance, Soviet military planners face formidable obstacles in Iran. In order to seize Iranian oil assets or Persian Gulf ports, a Soviet invasion would have to traverse the entire breadth of Iran to its southwestern littoral. Military analysts point out that despite the Soviet proximity to Iran and the size of Soviet forces, many factors, especially geographic, would make the success of such a Soviet assault both costly and uncertain. 50/

48/ U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency. Force Structure Summary -- U.S.S.R., Mongolia, and Eastern Europe. Washington, August 1984; McNaugher, Thomas L. Balancing Soviet Power in the Persian Gulf. The Brookings Review, v. 1, summer 1983. p. 20-21.

49/ The Military Balance, 1985-1986. London, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1985. p. 74-75.

50/ An excellent discussion of the difficulties faced by Soviet military planners is found in Epstein, Joshua M. Soviet Vulnerabilities in Iran and the RDF Deterrent. International Security, v. 6, fall 1981.

The key to this analysis is the vulnerability of the overland routes the Soviets would have to use to reach the oil-rich Khuzestan province and the Gulf littoral. They would have to cross two formidable mountain ranges and a wide plain. Only five north-south routes (four roads and one rail line) cross the steep and jagged mountains. Each is punctuated by numerous chokepoints -- bridges and long narrow gorges -- where blockage or destruction of the artery is possible, bypassing the obstruction impossible, and restoring the artery very time consuming. 51/

A Soviet advance from Afghanistan to the Persian Gulf is not practical. It would have to travel a greater distance and would still have to cross mountain ranges with the same constrictions noted above. In addition, Soviet supply lines would have to extend across the even more formidable mountains of Afghanistan, which the Soviets do not yet control. Soviet forces in Afghanistan are fully occupied in trying to suppress the insurgency there and could not be sent into Iran unless rapidly replaced by other units.

The Soviets have seven airborne divisions, two of which are stationed in southern military districts. But total Soviet airlift capability can transport and sustain the assault elements of two divisions, but not their heavy equipment. Quick linkup with forces moving overland would be imperative. Furthermore, a Soviet airborne assault and its resupply, overflying the mountain barriers, would be extremely vulnerable to hostile land- and carrier-based aircraft, especially since it would be beyond the effective range of most Soviet fighter escorts, (unless intermediate airbases became available) and would have to proceed with little support from the ground-controlled intercept system on which Soviet fighter operations depend. 52/

51/ Ibid., p. 130.

52/ Ibid., p. 149-52.

Soviet forces could eventually overcome Iranian resistance if they made a determined effort. But if U.S. forces were rapidly deployed to the area, Soviet prospects appear much less sanguine. Although Soviet forces are much closer to the area than U.S. forces, the low state of readiness of those Soviet forces precludes strategic surprise. Roughly three-quarters of the army divisions in the southern military districts of the U.S.S.R. are category 3, the lowest state of readiness. They are at less than 50 percent troop strength, some only with skeleton cadres and obsolescent equipment. 53/ The Soviets have not modernized the forces in the southern districts since 1979 as much as they have in other districts. 54/ Estimates range from 1 to 3 months for the amount of time needed to bring them to full combat strength. Such massive preparations could not go undetected. This would provide time for the United States to mobilize and begin deploying forces designated for the Central Command, which includes: four army divisions plus one independent armored and one air cavalry brigade; a Marine amphibious force, plus one Marine amphibious brigade; seven Air Force tactical fighter wings; a strategic projection force equipped with B-52 bombers; three aircraft carrier battle groups; one surface action group; five maritime patrol squadrons; and various specialized and support units. Furthermore, CENTCOM is scheduled for major expansion by FY89, featuring three additional fighter wings and two more ground divisions. 55/ Thus, despite its limitations, CENTCOM appears to be a significant deterrent to Soviet military intervention in Iran.

53/ Ibid., p. 139-40; The Military Balance, 1985-1986. London, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1986. p. 28-29.

54/ Interview with U.S. intelligence officials.

55/ U.S. Library of Congress. Congressional Research Service. U.S.-Soviet Military Balance, 1980-1985. Report No. 85-89 S, by John M. Collins. Washington, 1985. p. 244; Armed Forces Journal International. Oct. 1984. p. 95.

Soviet involvement in Afghanistan may also be a constraint on Soviet intervention in Iran. Most analysts agree that in 1979 Moscow expected to be able to crush the anti-Communist resistance, establish a reliable pro-Soviet regime, build up a capable Afghan Army, and withdraw most of its combat forces relatively quickly. After 6-1/2 years of bitter combat, the Afghan resistance still appears strong, and there is no end in sight for the Soviets in Afghanistan. Not only might the ongoing struggle in Afghanistan be a distraction from large-scale operations in Iran, the Afghan experience may discourage Soviet military and political leaders from too optimistic an assessment of the prospects in Iran, where they would face similar terrain, a much larger population, and perhaps even more fanatical resistance. There is little doubt that the protracted struggle in Afghanistan is a blow to Soviet military prestige -- perhaps even to its confidence to fight effectively in similar Third World areas.

POLITICAL DISINCENTIVES

In addition to these military considerations there are also serious political disincentives to a Soviet invasion of Iran. Other Persian Gulf and Middle East states, fearing Soviet expansionism, would be likely to turn to the United States, legitimizing a renewed and perhaps expanded U.S. military presence in the region. ^{56/} Even Iraq would not be pleased to have the Soviet Union on its eastern border. Soviet standing in other parts of the Third World would also suffer, especially in Islamic regions. Even more than in the case of Afghanistan in 1979, Soviet aggression against Iran could be expected

^{56/} Saivetz, Carol. The U.S.S.R. and Khomeini's Revolution. In Adelman, Jonathan, ed. The Superpowers and Revolution. New York, Praeger [Forthcoming].

to unify the United States and its allies (and perhaps China) in an anti-Soviet front.

Closer to home for the Soviets is the issue of their large (and growing) Muslim population and the revival of Islamic fundamentalism. There are nearly 50 million Muslims in the U.S.S.R., most of them concentrated in the Central Asian republics. Moreover, they are the most rapidly growing segment of the Soviet population, while the Slavic groups, including the Russians, are experiencing stagnant or declining birthrates. It is expected that by the year 2000 there will be 65-70 million Soviet Muslims, 21 percent of the population, and 33 percent of the pool of draft-age males. 57/

Some experts argue that there is already a perceptible and -- from the Soviet perspective -- troubling "spillover" of Islamic fundamentalism from Iran to the U.S.S.R. 58/ Others maintain that the Soviet Muslim population has been politically assimilated and socialized and is relatively quiescent. 59/ Soviet perceptions of the Islamic revival in their southern republics could have a bearing on future Soviet policy toward Iran. If Moscow is seriously concerned about the destabilizing influence of a revival of Islamic fundamentalism in the U.S.S.R., it might seek to eradicate the source of the disturbance, in Iran. Alternatively, the incorporation of Iranian Azerbaijan into the

57/ Feshbach, Murray. The Soviet Union: Population Trends and Dilemmas. Population Bulletin, v. 37, Aug. 1982. p. 21, 24; and Braker, Hans. Implications of the Islamic Question for Soviet Domestic and Foreign Policy. Central Asia Survey, v. 2, no. 1. p. 115.

58/ Bennigsen, Alexandre. Mullahs, Mujahidin and Soviet Muslims. Problems of Communism, Nov.-Dec. 1984. p. 28; Nissman, David. Iran and Soviet Islam. Central Asian Survey, v. 2, Dec. 1983.

59/ Ibid., n. 1.

U.S.S.R., seen as a possibility by some, 60/ might in this view be resisted by Moscow for fear of ingesting more of the "virus" of Islamic fundamentalism.

The accession of Mikhail Gorbachev in the Kremlin may also militate against Soviet military intervention in Iran. Most analysts agree that Gorbachev's top priorities are domestic: consolidation of his leadership and major reform of the bureaucracy and the economy. A major international conflict would not only be a "distraction" from this domestic agenda, but a highly counterproductive step for Gorbachev. In this view, systemic reform requires a relatively stable international scene (with reduced or moderated resource demands from the military and an ability to draw upon the trade and technology of the West and Japan), and could not be attempted in a period of international crisis such as would result from Soviet military intervention in Iran.

60/ In November 1982, Geidar A. Aliyev, a full Politburo member, told Western visitors it was his "personal hope" that Soviet and Iranian Azerbaijan would be united in the future. Aliyev, an Azeri, was First Secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan. Chubin, *The Soviet Union and Iran*, p. 933.

SOVIET POLICY TOWARD IRAN

Iran poses vexing problems for Soviet policymakers. It is vehemently anti-American in rhetoric and action; but it is a difficult neighbor, some of whose actions are viewed as anti-Soviet. ^{61/} Iran's closest relations are with Syria and Libya, both friends of Moscow; but Iran is at war with Iraq, another Soviet friend. The Soviets would like to improve relations with Iran, but at the same time they seek closer ties with the conservative Gulf monarchies that support Iraq and feel threatened by Iran's revolutionary zeal and military power.

Moscow has reoriented its policy toward Iran twice since the fall of the Shah: first displaying a friendly and supportive face to the new revolutionary regime, then after 1982-83, adopting the more reserved posture that still prevails.

SHIFTS IN SOVIET POLICY TOWARD IRAN

From the fall of the Shah in February 1979 to 1982, the Soviet Union studiously courted good relations with Iran. In addition to its claim of protecting the Iranian revolution against American repression, Moscow provided moral and political support to Iran in its seizure of hostages at the U.S. Embassy. The Soviets used their veto to block U.N. Security Council action against Iran. They also facilitated transshipment of goods through their

^{61/} The Iranian activities that Moscow complains most about are assistance to Afghan insurgents and religious broadcasting directed at Soviet Muslims.

territory to Iran to blunt the U.S.-sponsored trade embargo and moved to expand Soviet-Iranian trade as rapidly as possible.

In 1980, when Iraq attacked Iran, Moscow clearly tilted toward Iran in spite of its Friendship Treaty with Iraq. It condemned the Iraqi attack and took the position that the war served only U.S. and Israeli interests and should be ended as soon as possible. The Soviets risked undercutting the value and credibility of their friendship treaties with other states by halting the direct shipment of major weapons systems to Iraq, and are reported even to have offered arms sales to Iran in 1980. 62/

The Gulf war posed a real dilemma to Soviet foreign policy. It divided and weakened the coalition of radical and "rejectionist" Middle Eastern states opposed to U.S. and Israeli policies. It legitimized the return of U.S. military presence in the Gulf. And it forced Moscow to choose between Iraq, with whom it had cultivated close relations for more than 20 years, and Iran, where new opportunities had just arisen. Moscow sought to preserve good relations with both countries, but if forced to choose, as it had been under similar circumstances a few years earlier between Ethiopia and Somalia, Moscow appeared prepared to sacrifice relations with Iraq in favor of the "strategic prize" of the region, Iran.

Another indication of early Soviet attempts to woo Iran is that the Tudeh Party, presumably on orders from Moscow, threw its political support behind Khomeini and his Islamic Republican Party (IRP), and continued to praise Khomeini even when Tudeh was temporarily banned in mid-1979. When violent conflict erupted between the IRP and the nationalist, Marxist Mujahedin-e Khalq Party,

62/ Chubin, The Soviet Union and Iran, p. 934.

Tudeh allegedly betrayed the latter to the IRP, facilitating the bloody suppression of the Mujahedin-e Khalq in 1981. 63/

Moscow's optimistic and solicitous attitude toward the Islamic Republic of Iran began to change in 1982, and had clearly shifted by mid-1983 to a cooler and more critical attitude. Soviet journalists, academics, and political figures who had earlier praised the role of Islam in the Iranian revolution began to criticize the "reactionary" and "despotic" mullahs. This criticism, directed at first against "conservative factions" within the clergy, came to be directed against the IRP as a whole, and finally against Khomeini by name. 64/

Soviet displeasure was not only manifested verbally. There was a clear Soviet "tilt" back toward Iraq in the Gulf war. As the tide of battle swung toward Iran, which succeeded in launching a major offensive into Iraqi territory in July 1982, Moscow resumed direct arms shipments to Iraq. The level of Soviet military assistance to Iraq was increased further in 1983 and 1984. In March 1984, Y. A. Ryabov, Chairman of the Soviet State Committee for Foreign Economic Relations (and generally assumed to be in charge of arms export), led an important delegation to Baghdad. At this time, major economic and technical agreements were announced, including a Soviet commitment to build a nuclear reactor in Iraq. 65/ A month later, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Ramadan and Foreign Minister Aziz travelled to Moscow, where they signed a new long-term assistance agreement providing \$2 billion of credit on easy terms. In addition, the Soviets agreed to provide Iraq with long-sought, qualitatively new weapon

63/ Mitra, Iran and the Soviet Union, p. 611.

64/ Atkin, Soviet Disenchantment, *passim*.

65/ Ross, Dennis. Soviet Views Toward the Gulf War. *Orbis*, v. 28, fall 1984. p. 440.

systems, including surface-to-surface missiles and various air-to-ground munitions. 66/

After Iraq reopened diplomatic relations with the United States in November 1984, Moscow responded with promises of increased military and economic assistance to Baghdad. In May 1985, Moscow withdrew 1,500 technical experts from Iran. Soviet technicians had worked in Iran for years at such projects as the Soviet-built Isfahan Steel Mill, Iran's largest. Moscow announced that the technicians were being withdrawn because of the danger posed to them by Iraqi bombing raids in the continuing Gulf war. 67/ Iranian authorities denounced the withdrawal as an attempt to influence Teheran's policy toward the war. In May 1986, the Soviet Union and Iraq concluded a 5-year economic cooperation agreement in oil, energy, and irrigation, with promises of more Soviet trade credits. Soviet assistance to Iraq remains one of the most contentious issues in Soviet-Iranian relations. 68/

SOVIET TRADE WITH IRAN

While the Soviets demonstrated their displeasure with the Islamic Republic in various ways, they continued to hold open the possibility of improved relations, most notably with overtures to improve trade relations. 69/ It is a standard Soviet practice to use foreign trade as a palliative instrument when they wish to improve strained relations with another country. Despite Moscow's

66/ Ibid., p. 440-441; U.S. Department of State. Warsaw Pact Economic Aid to Non-Communist LDCs, 1984. Washington, May 1986. p. 13.

67/ Izvestia [Moscow], July 17, 1985, p. 4.

68/ Iran and the "Two Satans." Foreign Report [London], June 26, 1986. p. 1-3.

69/ Interview with U.S. State Department officials.

professed willingness to deal, however, Soviet-Iranian bilateral trade ^{dropped} by 50 percent from 1983 to 1984, and fell another 27 percent in 1985. 70/ This sharp decline reflects in part the strain of the 6-year-long Gulf war on Iran's economy. But it is also linked to the political tension between the two states. In 1985, Ali Rafsanjani, Speaker of the Iranian Majlis (Parliament) accused Moscow of using the prospect of trade and economic assistance to force Iran to "waver from its principles." He charged that the Soviets wanted Iran to ignore the conflict in Afghanistan and export gas to the U.S.S.R. "almost freely, just as the Shah did in the past." 71/

In the past year, however, Teheran has shown some interest in improved economic relations with its northern neighbor. In July 1985, an Iranian economic delegation visited Moscow for the first time in years; a month later, the two sides held bilateral talks about cooperative exploitation of Caspian Sea gas reserves; and in September, the two countries signed a declaration of intent to expand economic ties and revive a bilateral joint economic commission. 72/

In 1985, the two sides also reopened negotiations on Iranian gas exports to the Soviet Union, talks that broke down in 1980, leading Iran to close the IGAT pipeline. In August 1986, the two sides agreed to resume this trade, beginning with a small volume in December 1986 and gradually increasing to 3

70/ Total Soviet-Iranian trade turnover in 1983 was 930 million rubles. It fell to 484 million rubles in 1984, and 350 million rubles in 1985. [Soviet] Foreign Trade. Moscow No. 3. March 1985, No. 3. March 1986.

71/ Nahaylo, Bohdan. Kornienko's Visit to Teheran and the Limited Prospects for a Soviet-Iranian Reconciliation. Radio Liberty Research. RL 61/86, Feb. 4, 1986. p. 4.

72/ Ibid., p. 4-5.

billion cubic meters per year by 1990. 73/ In the 1970s, Iran supplied the southern U.S.S.R. with 5 billion cubic meters annually. 74/ Neither side has revealed specific terms of the deal. Iran is believed to need the added income because of the cost of its war of attrition with Iraq and the sharp fall in the price of oil. The Soviet Union, one of the world's largest gas exporters, is probably more interested in improved relations with Iran than in Iranian gas.

A POLICY OF WATCHFUL WAITING

Although the Soviets have not succeeded in achieving the influence in Iran they almost certainly hoped for at the time of the Shah's fall, it would be a mistake to conclude that they have written off the Iranian revolution as a net loss or a hopeless prospect. The minimum objective that they have already realized, the expulsion of U.S. influence, is not to be scorned. Furthermore, Soviet planners may believe that the Iranian revolution has not necessarily run its full course. The 84-year-old Khomeini has long been reported to be in poor health. His death may destabilize the factions within the ruling Islamic Republican Party and transform Iran's political landscape. The Soviets need feel no pressure for a quick victory or a policy of high risk in Iran. They may feel they can afford to take the long view, secure in the knowledge that they have already greatly improved their position vis-a-vis the United States, and confident that they are in a position to take advantage of further opportunities as they occur. In the meantime, they try to keep their options open.

73/ Iran Reports Deal to Sell Natural Gas to Soviet Union. Washington Post. Aug. 26, 1986, p. A1.

74/ According to Dario Scuka, a CRS specialist in international petroleum affairs, it will probably take many months to assess the condition of the long-idle IGAT pipeline, and extensive repairs may be needed before commercial operation can be resumed. The final price of the gas may not be set until the condition and capacity of the pipeline is determined.

Moscow seeks to ease bilateral tensions, expand trade, and improve state-to-state relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. But it also supports the outlawed Tudeh Party and promotes cooperation between Tudeh and other leftist, anti-clerical factions. At the same time, Moscow continues to provide enough low-level support to Azeri and Kurdish nationalists to retain good contacts and some influence in Iran's northern borderlands. And, finally, Moscow continues to insist on the legitimacy of articles 5 and 6 of the 1921 Soviet-Iranian Friendship Treaty, with its implicit threat of military intervention.

CONCLUSIONS

In view of the preceding analysis, there is little reason to expect major shifts in Soviet policy toward Iran in the near term. Moscow will probably continue its patient policy of seeking improvements in relations with Teheran, with economic relations at the leading edge.

If formal state-to-state relations remain strained and the most conservative faction of the clergy continues to dominate Iranian policies, Moscow may increase somewhat its pressure on Teheran, e.g., by upgrading its military and political support of Iraq; increasing contact with Kurdish and Azeri dissidents; building up Soviet military forces in the southern districts; conducting military exercises near the frontier; allowing military operations occasionally to spill over the Afghan frontier into northeastern Iran. But nearly all analysts agree that unless there were a radical transformation of the domestic political scene in Iran and/or a major (hostile) shift in Iran's foreign policy, the U.S.S.R. would be most unlikely to mount a direct military challenge to Iran.

Is there then no Soviet military threat? Aren't there some circumstances under which the U.S.S.R. might be inclined to use its preponderant military force against Iran? Three contingencies come to mind.

The first is a dramatic shift in the tide of battle in the Gulf war presaging a decisive Iranian victory over Iraq. Such an outcome would be extremely unwelcome in Moscow, especially if it led to the replacement of the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad with one dominated by the Shiite clergy. Moscow could not be indifferent to the total defeat of a nearby regime with which it had a Friendship Treaty. That would seriously undermine the value of

ties with Moscow in the eyes of other Third World governments. It would also completely upset the balance in the Persian Gulf, making a militant Iran the predominant power. Saudi Arabia and the other states of the Gulf Cooperative Council might then feel that they faced the prospects either of turning directly to the United States for protection or being swept up in the wave of revolutionary Islamic fundamentalism. Either outcome would be a serious reversal for Soviet policy in the region. Finally, Moscow would have to be concerned about the influence a victorious, militantly Islamic Iran would exert on Afghanistan, and ultimately on the Muslim-populated republics of Soviet Central Asia.

If Iran appeared to be on the verge of a decisive military victory, Moscow might well take steps to prevent the collapse of Iraq. An airlift of military supplies would be likely. Would Soviet forces be sent to bolster Iraq directly? Possibly. If so, that would raise the risk of direct Soviet-Iranian conflict. Alternatively or simultaneously, the U.S.S.R. might bring military pressure to bear on Iran's northern frontier as a way of relieving pressure on the Iraqi front.

Such a scenario is speculative and rather unlikely, but it is not as implausible as it seemed a year or two ago. Even after Iran went over to the offensive in 1982, military analysts believed that decisive victory was beyond Iran's ability. But Iran's seizure of the Faw Peninsula and its continued offensive pressure at Majnoon and Mehran in 1986 seriously strain Iraq's military resources. The ultimate military outcome is uncertain. But few military analysts predict that Iraq is near defeat. Iraqi forces still have massive air superiority and big advantages in tanks, artillery, and other heavy weapons, and are defending their own territory on terrain that favors the defensive. Furthermore, if forced to choose, Moscow might well let Iraq fall rather than intervene directly in the fighting and risk U.S. involvement.

A second contingency that might trigger Soviet military intervention against Iran is greatly increased Iranian involvement in the Afghan insurgency. High-level Iranian officials have spoken of turning their attention to Afghanistan after they have settled with Iraq. 75/ Some Western analysts credit this as a possibility on the grounds that religious mission is the Islamic Republic's principal *raison d'etre*. Increased Iranian support for the Afghan rebels would certainly provoke Soviet ire and probably Soviet countermeasures. But Iranian intervention would almost certainly have to be on a massive scale to provoke large-scale Soviet military intervention in Iran. Most analysts believe that despite the clerics' undoubted religious zeal, they have demonstrated an underlying political realism and pragmatism that recognizes the danger of too overt a challenge to their superpower neighbor. Even before their attention was diverted by the start of the Gulf war in September 1980, the Iranians had shown considerable restraint toward the conflict in Afghanistan.

A third contingency that might invite Soviet intervention is the possibility of political fragmentation in Iran after Khomeini's death. Khomeini, born in 1902, is now 84 years old and reportedly in poor health. His charismatic leadership was a vital element in the Iranian revolution and continues to play a major role in the cohesion of the Islamic Republic. Some believe that it is indispensable. Traditionally, the Islamic clergy has not actually governed the state, but Khomeini used his stature to create a religiously supervised Islamic republic presided over by himself, the Imam, the acknowledged expert in religious-legal matters. All agree that Khomeini's role has been a vital one.

75/ Campbell, John C. *The Soviet Union in the Middle East*. Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies. Occasional Paper No. 184. Washington, D.C., March 1984.

Khomeini did not acquire his present status as the supreme religious authority in Iran (Imam) by election. Like his predecessors, Khomeini's elevation was a process of increasing acclamation in which his religious credentials, abilities, probity, and historical opposition to the secular and oppressive government of the Shah gradually distinguished him as the first among equals of the leading religious figures in Iran. 76/

Recognizing the crucial importance of his role, Khomeini has taken steps to institutionalize it so that after his death there will be a prompt and clear choice of a successor. At Khomeini's direction, elections were held in December 1982 for a Council of Elders, a body of 83 men that will select the next Imam. This is a novel arrangement. Never before in Iran has there been a formalized system to elect the supreme religious authority. 77/ Some question whether this process, and beyond that, the "mullahcracy" of the Islamic Republic, will be able to retain legitimacy and order after Khomeini's death.

Within the clerical ranks today there are vague factions, but no one of Khomeini's stature. The ruling clerics have succeeded so far in maintaining their own cohesion through consensus politics. But Khomeini's death and the selection of a successor could very well begin a process of fragmentation. 78/

There are various scenarios for political fragmentation in post-Khomeini Iran. The Council of Elders may elect one man to succeed Khomeini, or a group of three or five. Or they may fail to agree on a successor. The successor may or may not enjoy widespread legitimacy. If there is prolonged dissension among

76/ Olson, William J. The Succession Crisis in Iran. Washington Quarterly, summer 1983. p. 156.

77/ Ibid.

78/ Ibid., p. 158.

the ruling mullahs, their authority may be undermined, especially if economic stagnation and the war with Iraq continue. If their authority declines, the Revolutionary Guards, or even a coalition of leftist parties could emerge as effective political rivals. Alternatively, central authority may simply wither. The weakening of Teheran's authority traditionally has given rise to assertions of autonomy among the non-Persian minorities. In view of the violent repressions perpetrated by the ruling clerics, the possibility even of civil war can not be ruled out entirely.

Political fragmentation is seen as a possible entre for Soviet intervention. If leftists seize power, even temporarily, they might call in Soviet support (as the Afghan Communists did in 1978). Some other embattled faction, not necessarily Communist, might in extremis appeal to Moscow for support. Insurrection in Iran's borderlands might provide an opportunity for Moscow to encourage and support secessionism in one or more of Iran's important northern provinces. Anarchy or civil war could enable the Soviets to intervene, perhaps on the basis of the 1921 treaty, and establish a pro-Soviet regime.

Of the three contingencies which might lead to direct Soviet intervention in Iran, it is the third, political fragmentation, that is viewed as the most plausible. It is a possibility that can not be ruled out. Some see political fragmentation as a growing likelihood. But, the overwhelming majority of published sources and experts consulted for this study believe that the Islamic Republic of Iran shows considerable strength and durability. Even Iranian emigres who detest the regime grudgingly concede its apparent staying power and speak of the "institutionalization of the Islamic revolution." ^{79/} In this view, the post-Khomeini period will see the continued rule of the clergy.

^{79/} Interviews with Iranian emigres.

The problems of government and the climate of seige have . . . turn[ed] the IRP into more than an ephemeral faction Control of the government and a background of shared religious values have given the party a practical and an ideological purpose that have helped to override petty differences, giving it a definitive structure. This has meant better coordination and concomitant electoral success, further supported by the degree of political control the party enjoys plus a near monopoly on religious legitimacy. Using this base, the IRP has been able to outmaneuver and eliminate rivals, allowing it to dominate Iran and virtually turn it into a one-party state. 80/

A major test of the Islamic Republic will be its ability to maintain cohesion without Khomeini's commanding presence. If it passes that test -- and most experts believe it will -- there will probably be little opportunity for Soviet intervention.

In the final analysis, the political cohesion of the Islamic Republic and the formidable problems faced by Soviet military planners (including the U.S. deterrent) combine to make Soviet military intervention in Iran unlikely in the foreseeable future.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

The Islamic Republic of Iran poses serious challenges for U.S. foreign and defense policies in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. On one hand, Islamic fundamentalism of the Iranian variety is militantly anti-American and anti-Israeli, and professes to seek the expulsion of U.S. influence (and the state of Israel) from the region. Even if it cannot achieve such goals, it can damage U.S. interests, as it did in Lebanon in 1983. On the other hand, Islamic fundamentalism is inherently anti-Communist. Its supporters claim it is the most effective bulwark against the spread of Soviet influence and power in the region.

80/ Olson, Succession Crisis in Iran, p. 158.

From the U.S. perspective, is Iran part of the problem or part of the solution? Perhaps the best answer is that it depends on how one defines the problem. If the principal problem in the region is seen as combatting international terrorism and assuring the security of Israel and the conservative, oil-producing Gulf states, Iran is part of the problem. If the principal problem, however, is seen as containing the spread of Soviet influence and power in an unstable region, the Islamic Republic may be part of the solution.

Regardless of which formulation of the problem one puts uppermost, it seems clear that as long as the region is judged vital to U.S. national security, it will be necessary for the United States to maintain CENTCOM as a powerful military force and to assure military access to the region through some combination of basing agreements, prepositioning, and enhanced sea and airlift. A visible and credible U.S. military capability in the region protects U.S. interests there and helps U.S. friends resist the excesses of radical Islamic fundamentalism. At the same time, it serves as a deterrent against Soviet military intervention in the region.

A major challenge for U.S. policy toward Iran in the next few years will be how to oppose Iran's revolutionary and anti-American programs and its sponsorship of terrorism without permanently alienating the post-Khomeini generation and creating opportunities for the Soviet Union.

APPENDIX I

TREATY OF FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN PERSIA AND THE RUSSIAN SOCIALIST

FEDERAL SOVIET REPUBLIC, February 26, 1921

....

Article 5.

The two High Contracting Parties undertake :

(1) To prohibit the formation or presence within their respective territories, of any organisations or groups of persons, irrespective of the name by which they are known, whose object is to engage in acts of hostility against Persia or Russia, or against the Allies of Russia.

They will likewise prohibit the formation of troops or armies within their respective territories with the afore-mentioned object.

(2) Not to allow a third Party or any organisation, whatever it be called, which is hostile to the other Contracting Party, to import or to convey in transit across their countries material which can be used against the other Party.

(3) To prevent by all means in their power the presence within their territories or within the territories of their Allies of all armies or forces of a third Party in cases in which the presence of such forces would be regarded as a menace to the frontiers, interests or safety of the other Contracting Party.

Article 6.

If a third Party should attempt to carry out a policy of usurpation by means of armed intervention in Persia, or if such Power should desire to use Persian territory as a base of operations against Russia, or if a Foreign Power should threaten the frontiers of Federal Russia or those of its Allies, and if the Persian Government should not be able to put a stop to such menace after having been once called upon to do so by Russia, Russia shall have the right to advance her troops into the Persian interior for the purpose of carrying out the military operations necessary for its defence. Russia undertakes, however, to withdraw her troops from Persian territory as soon as the danger has been removed.

....

ANNEX I.

TEHERAN, December 12, 1921.

Sir,

The Persian Government and the Mejlis have observed that Articles 5 and 6 of the Treaty concluded between our two countries are worded vaguely; the Mejlis moreover, desires that the retrocession of Russian concessions to the Persian Government should be made without reserve or condition, and, that Article 20 should be so worded as to allow the Persian Government full powers for the transit of imports and exports. Conversations have taken place with you on these questions, and you have given explanations with regard to Articles 5 and 6 and promises concerning Articles 13 and 20, to the effect that if the Treaty were passed by the Mejlis you would give all the assistance in your power to ensure that the two Articles in question should be revised on the lines desired by the Mejlis and the Persian Government. The Persian Government and the Mejlis are most desirous that friendly relations should be re-established between our two Governments, and that the Treaty, which is based upon the most amicable sentiments, should be concluded as soon as possible.

I have, therefore, the honour to request you to give in writing your explanations with regard to the interpretation of Articles 5 and 6, and to repeat the promises of support which you have already given as regards the revision of Articles 13 and 20, in order that the Persian Government may be enabled to secure the passing of the Treaty by the Mejlis.

I also wish to ask you to take the necessary steps to repair the error which has been made in Article 3, in which the word "commission" was written instead of "treaty", as the only treaty which was concluded in 1881 was a frontier delimitation treaty, and this is the treaty referred to in Article 3.

I have the honour to be, Sir, etc.

(Signed) MOCHAROS-SALTANEH.

No. 1600.

ANNEX II.

TEHERAN, December 12, 1921.

YOUR EXCELLENCY,

In reply to your letter dated 20th day of Ghows, I have the honour to inform you that Articles 5 and 6 are intended to apply only to cases in which preparations have been made for a considerable armed attack upon Russia or the Soviet Republics allied to her, by the partisans of the regime which has been overthrown or by its supporters among those foreign Powers which are in a position to assist the enemies of the Workers' and Peasants' Republics and at the same time to possess themselves, by force or by underhand methods, of part of the Persian territory, thereby establishing a base of operations for any attacks — made either directly or through the counter-revolutionary forces — which they might meditate against Russia or the Soviet Republics allied to her. The Articles referred to are therefore in no sense intended to apply to verbal or written attacks directed against the Soviet Government by the various Persian groups, or even by any Russian émigrés in Persia, in so far as such attacks are generally tolerated as between neighbouring Powers animated by sentiments of mutual friendship.

With regard to Articles 13 and 20, and the small error to which you draw attention in Article 3 with reference to the Convention of 1881, I am in a position to state categorically, as I have always stated, that my Government, whose attitude towards the Persian nation is entirely friendly, has never sought to place any restriction upon the progress and prosperity of Persia. I myself fully share this attitude, and would be prepared, should friendly relations be maintained between the two countries, to promote negotiations with a view to a total or partial revision of these Articles on the lines desired by the Persian Government, as far as the interests of Russia permit.

In view of the preceding statements, I trust that, as you promised me in your letter, your Government and the Mejlis will ratify the Treaty in question as soon as possible.

I have the honour to be, Your Excellency, etc.

(Signed) ROTSTEIN,
Diplomatic Representative of the
Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic.